

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, January 4, 2009  
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"THREE REACTIONS TO CHRIST'S BIRTH"

Matthew 2:1-12

When U. S. President Bush announced the rescue plan for the auto industry, the media reported that reaction was mixed. Auto makers, unions, taxpayers, politicians all responded differently, depending on how would affect them. Whenever a big event occurs reaction from people is always mixed. What is good news for some may not be so good for others. Now the birth of Christ was a major event, so major, in fact, that it divided history in two - B.C. - before Christ, and A.D. - after Christ. No matter how much the world may want to escape Christ, it can never do so, because of the way history is now dated with reference to his birth.

But reactions to his birth were mixed, as we can see from the passage we read today from Matthew's Gospel. The story is that of the wise men being guided to the new-born king by a bright star in the sky. Now astronomers tell us that this star was most likely a rare conjunction of planets, which happens only every thousand years. And to the ancient Persian astronomers, this bright light signified the birth of an extraordinary individual. In fact, they may have been familiar with the Hebrew scriptures which prophesied that such a person would be born in the land of Judah. Remember that 5-600 years before Israel had lived in exile in the land of Persia (Babylon) so the Hebrew scriptures had entered most likely entered into the general religious melting-pot. And that bright light, whatever it was, was certainly God's way of guiding them to Christ. After all, this creation belongs to God and he can use it however he chooses to fulfill his purposes and lead people to his truth. So the wise men followed the star and when they arrived in Jerusalem they made inquiries, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him." Now as we look at the story recorded in Matthew 2:1-12 we see three main responses to Christ's birth. These reactions to Jesus would continue throughout his earthly life. In fact, these are the three common reactions of people to Christ today.

**First there is the reaction of rejection.**

Herod heard that the wise men had arrived and were asking about the new-

born king. Herod was troubled and the city covered in fear. Herod tended to meet any threats to his rule with swift and cruel action. So he gathered the Jewish experts together and demanded of them where Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem according to our Scripture." Cunning Herod sent the wise men to search for the child and told them to bring him word so that he too might go and worship him. Of course, Herod meant to destroy the child, and when he discovered that the wise men had gone home by another way he was so furious that he ordered the death of all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Thankfully, God warned Joseph in a dream and so he and Mary and the baby escaped to Egypt, returning home only after Herod had died. Herod rejected Jesus.

Jesus encountered rejection throughout his life. Soon after starting his public ministry he preached in the Nazareth synagogue and applied a Messianic Scripture to himself. Some were so upset that they tried to throw him off a cliff on the outskirts of town. Thankfully he was able to escape the treachery of the mob. Later in Jerusalem at Passover, the religious leaders found him guilty of blasphemy, because he claimed to be God's Son, the Messiah. It never occurred to them that what Jesus claimed for himself was true. They were more interested in protecting their own privileges and positions. So the religious leaders, assisted by the vacillating Pilate and a mob which shouted "Crucify him", arranged for him to be rejected once and for all. Jesus was nailed to the Cross, which was the ultimate rejection, since crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals. Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would be "despised and rejected of men."

Rejection is still the reaction of many people to Christ. Make no mistake about it. The reason Christians must be insistent about keeping Christ in Christmas is because so many people would remove him altogether. Please hear me when I say this, for I believe it's true. All the politically correct demands for religious sensitivity at Christmas time are but a cover for the rejection of Christ. Have you noticed how the demands for accommodation seem directed only towards Christians and anything to do with Christ?

The rejection of Christ goes on in other ways. In the media clever people, even those who call themselves Christian downgrade Christ or misrepresent the Christian faith. And there are the outright attacks of atheists on Christ, even to the point of denying that he existed as a historical figure. Christians in various parts of the world are still persecuted or even killed for their faith. And Christ would say, "In so far as you reject one of the least of my followers you are rejecting me." In many and various ways, the person of Christ is still rejected. It still is a common reaction to Christ today - to doubt his word, to reject him,

to crucify him, to bury him.

But to reject Christ is to commit spiritual suicide. It is to turn one's back on God and to put oneself under judgement. It is to set oneself against the Lord of life and death before whose judgement seat we will all appear. Rejecting Christ is serious business with profound implications for this life and for eternity.

### **A second common reaction to Christ is that of neutrality.**

The wise men went to the religious leaders and said, "We've seen the star of the new-born king. We know he's come and that he's not far from here. So where will we find him?" Well, the Jewish experts knew their Scriptures alright. They knew that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. But why weren't they overjoyed at the news of his birth? Why didn't they leap up and follow the wise men to Bethlehem? After all, this is the one the Hebrews had been longing for and waiting for. Here at last was the great desire of nations, in whom all the hopes and fears of the human race would be met. But the religious leaders allowed the wise men to go off on their own to Bethlehem while they stayed behind and looked after their usual concerns. They seemed indifferent to Christ's birth. They remained neutral.

It is the attitude of many people today. They don't out-and-out reject Christ or persecute his people. In fact, they may come to Church once or twice a year. They're glad the church is in the community doing good work. But as far as Christ goes, they remain indifferent, uncommitted, neutral. They want to keep their religious options open. It is an advance on rejection and such a person may eventually be led to make a Christian commitment.

But there's another side to neutrality. It may eventually lead to faith, but it can go the other way, too. Neutrality can turn into rejection when the chips are down. You remember how Pilate proclaimed neutrality about Jesus, taking water and washing his hands in front of the crowds, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves" - and then handed him over to be crucified. And wasn't it these same religious leaders whose indifference to Christ's birth became a conspiracy to have him crucified some thirty-three later?

It is fine to be a seeker for a time, but once God leads you to Christ, he doesn't expect you to remain uncommitted. Remaining neutral about Christ actually represents a decision. And while it doesn't seem as negative as rejection it can have the same end result.

### **But finally, there is the answer of commitment to Christ.**

If the answer of rejection is wrong and the answer of is inadequate, there is only one good option left, worship, faith, obedience, in a word, commitment, commitment to Christ and his way. The wise men knelt before him and opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Now it's been said that if it had been three wise women who had come seeking the new-born they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, brought a casserole, and offered gifts of diapers and baby clothes. Maybe so. But the point is that the wise men offered gifts as a sign of their commitment to Christ and their recognition of who he was. They realized that if this new born babe really was who the prophets claimed him to be, he deserved nothing less than their very best. And they knew that from that moment on their lives would take a new direction. They honoured Christ and rejected Herod and went home another way.

The wise men were the first of billions who now know that when we find Christ our searching is over, for this one meets all the hopes and fears of the human heart. They were the first of billions who have bowed before Christ and found their lives changed forever, filled and purpose and strength and grace. And the very best gift we have to give to Christ is ourselves. When we commit ourselves to Christ by repentance and faith and acceptance, we discover the companionship of an unseen but very real Master and friend whose love never lets us go, who fills our lives with meaning and direction, who opens our eyes to the reality and promise of God's Kingdom, who brings us into a fellowship of believers on earth and in heaven. In commitment to Christ we join ourselves to the crucified and Risen Saviour who will bring us safely to the Father's house above.

In these days of moral and religious confusion we must put away all compromises, indecisions and half-commitments and bow in humble adoration before the Lord of glory. In this new year I am renewing my personal commitment to Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord. I am committing myself anew to his service and to win people for his Kingdom. I am seeking in this new year to know Christ more fully, to make him known, and to follow in his way of love and righteousness and justice. As we receive this holy sacrament today I invite you to join me in that commitment.